

Remarks on the 30th Anniversary of the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993
February 2, 2023

Natasha, thank you very much.

Folks, as I was sitting listening to everyone, I was reminded that back during a very, very important hearing in the Judiciary Committee, when I was chairman, we were working on a very difficult subject. I won't mention the—it was a Justice that was very conservative, and we were working very hard to keep him from being on the Bench. He's a decent man, but his philosophy was not.

And we had worked really, really hard bringing in scholars from all around the country during the entire summer preparing for this hearing. And one particular person was in charge of knowing the detail—all the significant detail of all of his voting record.

And just before we started the hearing—a matter of fact, the day of the hearing, he—I heard that he was having difficulty at home with a marital circumstance. And that—but he kept showing up for the hearings. And, Mr. President, I told him that if he came in and continued to come in, he was fired. *[Laughter]* And the reason I did that was because I remember what happened to me.

When I got elected to the United States Senate, I was 29 years old, and I had won a very close election against a popular guy. Nixon won my State by, I think, 64 percent of the vote; I won by a whopping thirty-one or thirty-two hundred votes, only because my sister managed my campaign, the reason I won. *[Laughter]*

But all kidding aside, I was down here in Washington in Teddy's—in Teddy Kennedy's office—he was the Whip at the time—on December 18, hiring folks. And I got a phone call saying my wife and daughter had just been killed and my two boys were very badly injured. They were in the car. A tractor-trailer hit—broad-sided them. And I didn't want to come to the United States Senate. I really didn't.

I had my brother and my sister—and Chris knows them both well. I asked them to talk to the incoming Governor. We elected a Democratic Governor as well. But we hadn't had what was referred to as a "progressive Senator" in Delaware for a while because it was a very conservative—it was—it used to be a red State. We didn't call it that then.

And so—but a group of Senators who were, really, so good to me—saved my sanity—starting with Mike Mansfield and Tom Eagleton; and the distinguished Senator from South Carolina, Fritz Hollings; and Tom Eagleton. And they all said, "Come and just stay 6 months." *[Laughter]* And at the time, I thought they needed—they said, "You have to help us organize." We had 58 Democratic Senators. *[Laughter]* That shows you how smart I was. *[Laughter]*

But the point was that I started commuting every day, 260 miles a day, on the train to come home with my kids. And that's because I was really, really lucky. I had a sister, who's my best friend, and a brother, my buddy, 5 years younger. And they gave up where they lived and moved into where I was. They helped me raise my kids.

And every morning, I dropped my kids off when they were little at my mom's house, not far from ours. And I thought to myself: I was able to continue to work and continue to be paid because I had the option of being able to—I had a family that was so supportive and a universe of family just around me taking care of everything.

And I swore that since I was able to—and by the way, when you're a Senator and you only have one—you have a thousand bosses, but you only have one but you, and you make a decision to—if you're going to vote or not vote. And sometimes when there was an important event, a teacher meeting—not a joke—or a foot—a baseball game or whatever, I'd look and see what the votes of the day were. And if they weren't consequential, they were going to pass overwhelmingly, I'd stay with my kids. I'd go to the teacher's meeting.

And I thought to myself that, you know, if in fact I could do that—I could do that—I was going to make sure everyone in my office is. Everybody who works for me gets a memo. And the memo says: "If you ever need time, you never have to explain why. All you have to do is tell me you can't show up." I take you at your word. I don't want you to have to reveal what the reason is. If you don't—you can't show up, you can't show up. I'm trusting you that you're not going to play a game.

Well, you know, there's so many people who can't.

You know, Madam Vice President, I want to thank you and—for all—and all the women and families that are taking care of everybody. And I want to thank the Members of Congress in here with working families.

Chris, who I know as—we've been friends a long time—as Christie—Christie, you're the reason for the Family Medical Leave Act. You are. [*Inaudible*].

And this guy felt it in every fiber in his being when he was running as—when he was Governor and when he became President. And by the way, welcome home, ole buddy. [*Laughter*] Welcome home.

He made history by signing that act in—into law. And you know, as a team effort, I was—especially want to thank my friend, as I said, Chris Dodd. But I also—that woman sitting next to him was a little bit helpful too. I—[*laughter*]. At any rate—and by the way, stand up for a second. Come on. Come up.

[*At this point, Representative Rosa L. DeLauro stood up in the audience.*]

[*Applause*] I learned a long time ago—[*applause*]—I learned a long time ago: Just say "yes." [*Laughter*] Have you ever asked me for anything I just haven't said "yes"? Because I know I'm going to have to say it eventually. [*Laughter*]

Please, sit down.

But all kidding aside, you know, Chris first introduced that bill I think in '86, if I'm not mistaken—the mid-eighties. And working with Republicans—Chris and I still have this weird idea you can still work with the Republicans—he negotiated a bipartisan compromise to get it done.

And meanwhile, along came candidate Clinton, and he not only signed it, but he convinces people why it was such a good thing to do. And it was a good thing to do. He knew in the United States that in America, no one should have to choose between their job and their family.

Chris has heard me say this a thousand times. My dad used to say: "Joey, a job is about a lot more than a paycheck. It's about your dignity. It's about respect. It's about your place in the community." And the American people agreed.

And because of the years of work and the tenacious advocacy of many of you who are here today—of course, the First Lady, Hillary Rodham Clinton, is a tenacious advocate as ever was for this law as well—2 weeks after President Clinton took office, it became the law, and it transformed the lives of literally millions of men and women.

The law was a step toward that dignity my dad used to talk about. Dignity for working families. Dignity for workers who—with serious illnesses, like cancer, and parents of new children—children and aging parents, disabled family members. I mean, it makes a gigantic difference. Dignity for women who are so often responsible for caring for everybody else—for everybody else in the family. And dignity for men, because being there for your family is often the most consequential thing you can do. The most consequential thing—that's the example that the President gave about that father he met.

Dignity and security for millions of families, because finally—finally—for the first time in history, a majority of working Americans could take time off work, care for somebody they loved, and care for themselves without fear of losing their job. To have a little dignity when they needed it most.

And, folks—and by the way, family medical leave isn't only for workers and families. As mentioned earlier—and I'll take—I'll not go into the detail, but as pointed out by both my colleagues, it's good for business. It's good for business. And it's increased—it's increased—the overall GDP by well over a trillion dollars. It's done a lot of really, really good things.

When workers can take leave—when they're able to do that rather than have to stay in their job—they're better off, and the businesses are better off as well, because things get done.

And as a nation, we've made a lot of progress over the last 30 years. Over time, we've expanded the Family and Medical Leave Act: Up to 26 weeks of leave to care for servicemembers with serious illnesses or—incurred on Active Duty.

My son lay in the hospital for 18 months after coming back from Iraq and died. I don't know how—if we—if I hadn't had this job, I don't know quite what I would have done. I don't know quite what we would've done.

And so the fact is that up to 12 weeks to handle a military deployments, because when they get—deployment occurs, it really changes a family and takes it all out of gear. And look, which can be—it can be a major adjustment for families. Twelve weeks paid parental leave for Federal employees.

And then we strengthened protections against pay discrimination. We extended Medicaid coverage for new moms for a year postpartum.

And I'm proud to say that under our administration, we've made additional progress.

In December, as we've mentioned earlier, we passed the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act. It filled an important gap in Federal protection by requiring employees [employers; White House correction] to make reasonable accommodations for pregnant women and new norm—new moms, like letting them have water breaks, bathroom breaks, "sit down and work" breaks.

Can you imagine asking that? *[Laughter]* My Lord. Think about it though. Think about it. Too many women have been denied the just simple, basic support.

Plus, this law gives new moms time off to recover after they've had a baby. That's considered a "reasonable accommodation." I guess so. *[Laughter]* But think about it. We've got to say that. I mean, a "reasonable accommodation"? Like that's something we discovered? *[Laughter]*

So workers who don't get family leave through Family and Medical Leave Act may not now—may now get parental leave through this new law. You know, and when I ran for President, I promised to get this done, and we keep our promises.

Look, I also signed a law that gives nearly 9 million nursing mothers the time for private space to pump at work. I mean, think about it. What a—what an awful demand. I mean, my Lord. Salacious. *[Laughter]* Remember some of the arguments made?

Until now, teachers, nurses, farmworkers, and others were at the mercy of their employers.

Folks, this shouldn't be that complicated. It gets down to—a word I guess we Irish overuse: It gets down to basic dignity. It's about being a country where women and all people can both work and raise a family.

And today we're taking another step forward. I just signed a Presidential memorandum to make sure that the Federal Government leads the way in supporting workers.

Right now employees only qualify for family and medical leave if they've been on the job 1 year. Get cancer after 6 months—your wife or your husband—look, I'm a great respecter of fate, and I know all too well that you can't schedule when your loved one might need your help badly. You can't tell a newborn infant or a dying parent that you'll be there for them next year. And when serious illness strikes, you can't reschedule that either.

So today I signed a memorandum—all Federal agencies, urging them to let Federal employees take leave during the first year of the job, from the time they get—if they need it.

And I'm also directing the Office of Personnel Management to develop recommendations to help Federal employees take leave when they need—when they need—to find safety from domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking, so-called safe leave. That matters. It matters a lot. And you all know it.

Additionally, we made historic investments to make childcare more affordable so parents can work and provide for their kids. How can we compete in the global economy if millions of American parents, especially moms, can't join the workforce because childcare or eldercare costs them more than their paycheck?

The cost of childcare has gone up more than 200 percent over the last 30 years—200 percent. Most families' incomes haven't grown nearly that much. And a lot of parents do the math and realize they can't afford to go to work.

The first major piece of legislation I signed, the American Rescue Plan, provided historic tax relief to millions of families to help cover children's cost through the largest increase in history of the child tax credit and the dependent care tax credit.

The thing we don't talk about much either: It also helped 200,000 childcare providers, many of them small businesses, stay open during the pandemic to continue to serve 9.5 million children during that period. Look—and these funds help increase pay for childcare workers who are significantly underpaid. They're overwhelmingly women, especially women of color.

And I just signed legislation that increases the Child Care Development Block Grant by 30 percent, helping low-income families afford childcare.

But here's what matters. More than half the women in my Cabinet—more than—more than half the people in my Cabinet, more than half of the women on the—in my administration are women. You think, "Well, God, that's across the board."

Well, let's—30 years ago, we ranked number six—number six—among advanced economies that the share of—that—the share of women in the workforce. Know what we rank today? Nineteenth. Nineteenth.

This is the United States of America, for God's sake. Women are 50 percent of our—a little—slightly more than 51 percent of our population—50 percent of our population. We can't reach our full economic potential if we leave half the workforce behind.

Look, I ran for President to rebuild the backbone of America, the middle class. As you've heard me say a hundred times, Wall Street didn't build America, the middle class built America. And by the way, unions built the middle class.

So I come of a family that never very much benefited from a trickle-down economics. But when you build from the bottom up and the middle out, poor folks get a shot and the middle class can live a decent life, and the wealthy still do very well. They still do very well.

Two years in the making, we're making real progress. These have been the strongest 2 years of job growth on record. Unemployment rate for women when I was sworn in was over 6 percent. It's now 3.6 percent. Black women and Hispanic women unemployment numbers fell even greater.

In my first year as President, we saw the largest 1-year growth ever in women's participation in the labor force in nearly 30 years. Meanwhile, to disprove the notion this is going to cost the economy, we—the economy is growing. Wages are up.

Over the last 2 years, more Americans applied to start a small business than any year on record. Any year on record. And a critical part of that—a critical part of that—is creating an economy where all workers, including women, have access to jobs, education, training, and support they need to seize the opportunity while still being there for their families.

Look, the legislation we celebrate today was an incredibly important step, but a first step. And the United States is still one of our—only countries in the world that doesn't guarantee paid leave. One of the only countries in the world that doesn't—look, as a result, 94 percent of our lowest wage workers, mostly women and workers of color, have no paid family leave at all—94 percent. Meaning you can only take time to care for your loved one if you can afford to give up your salary.

I remain committed to changing that and bringing into line with every single other major economy in the world by passing a national program of paid leave and medical leave.

And by the way, American workers deserve paid sick days as well. Paid sick days.

Look, I've called on Congress to act, and I'll continue fighting, as I know all of you will as well. No American should ever choose to—have to choose between a paycheck and taking care of a family member or taking care of themselves.

You know, I believe that one of the best ways to continue making progress is to ensure women are at every table where decisions are made. Every table. Not a joke. I promised that my administration would look like America. As I said, my Cabinet is—first majority-female Cabinet in American history. And we just heard from the first-ever woman Vice President, a leader in our administration for women's health, women's economic security, and equity for all Americans.

And with her help and so many of you who are here in this room, we're going to continue to make progress in the years ahead. I can honestly say, as I stand here before you—you've heard me say it before—I've never—I've been doing this a long time. I know you don't believe that, but I—*[laughter]*—but I have.

Look, I've never been more optimistic about America's future. Never. Never. We just have to remember who in the hell we are. We're the—no, I mean this sincerely, from the bottom of my heart: We're the United States of America. There is nothing—nothing, nothing, nothing—beyond our capacity if we set our mind to it and we do it together. There's nothing we've ever failed at when we've tried.

Folks, we've got a lot of work to do—a lot of work—but I'm so happy to be able to welcome my President back to the United States Congress—back to the United States Capital. *[Laughter]* And he's promised me that I'll be able to sit at my desk tomorrow. *[Laughter]*

God bless you all, and may God protect our troops. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:57 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Natasha Jackson, community advocate, A Better Balance, who introduced the President. He also referred to his sister Valerie Biden Owens and brother James B. Biden.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993, 30th anniversary.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Biden, James B.; Biden, R. Hunter; Clinton, Hillary Rodham; Clinton, William J.; DeLauro, Rosa L.; Dodd, Christopher J.; Harris, Kamala D.; Jackson, Natasha; Owens, Valerie Biden.

Subjects: Bipartisanship; Child tax credit; Childcare facilities, government assistance; Childcare, access and affordability; COVID–19 pandemic; Domestic violence; Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993, 30th anniversary; Household income and wages; Job creation and growth; Maternal health care, improvement efforts; Medicare and Medicaid programs; Paid family and sick leave; Sexual assault and harassment; Tax relief; U.S. servicemembers, health and medical care; Unemployment rate; Vice President; Women's rights and gender equality.

DCPD Number: DCPD202300078.